

Lesson Two

GENESIS 12; 15–18; 21

Sarah: Waiting on a God Who Never Wastes Our Wait

Twenty-five years. That is the gap between the moment God told Abram, "I will make of you a great nation," and the moment Sarah laid the promised baby on her own chest. Twenty-five years between the word and the fulfillment. Twenty-five years of looking at an empty cradle, an aging body, and a husband who, like her, kept getting older while the promise kept getting later.

Sarah's life is the story of what God can do in a long wait. It is also the story of what He can do through a woman who, more than once, decides she has waited long enough. She is by turns courageous and afraid, faithful and fed up, regal and wickedly cruel. The writer of Hebrews will eventually call her a hero of faith. Peter will eventually call her a model of quiet trust. But you would never have predicted it from where she begins.

As you read Genesis 12 through 21 this week, watch what happens in the waiting. Watch what Sarah does when she trusts. Watch what she does when she stops trusting. And watch what God does, patient and unhurried and completely faithful, through the whole long quarter century.

First impressions

Sarah is the most prominent woman in the book of Genesis. She is named more than thirty times, more often than any other woman in the Old Testament. Her story stretches over ten chapters and three decades, and includes everything from a desert migration, to a kidnapping by Pharaoh, to a moment when angels eat lunch in her front yard. God will not let her be a footnote.

1.
 - a. Read Genesis 12; 15; 16; 17; 18; and 21 before working through the questions. After reading, what is your overall impression of Sarah?
 - b. Which scene from these chapters affects you most, and why?

For Further Study: Hebrews 11:11; 1 Peter 3:1 to 6; Romans 4; and Galatians 4:21 to 31 each take up Sarah's story from a New Testament angle. Skim each and note what the apostles see in her that we might otherwise miss.

The call (12:1–9)

Childlessness in the ancient Near East was more than personal sorrow. It was a social, economic, and (people assumed) spiritual judgment. A barren wife was thought to have failed her household and her God. Sarah carries this label for the entire first half of her story. Every time her name appears in Genesis 11 to 17 the text reminds us, somewhere nearby, that she had no child. The later passages where Hannah and Elizabeth grieve the same sorrow (1 Samuel 1; Luke 1) help us imagine what those decades cost her.

2.
 - a. What does God ask Abram to leave behind in 12:1? What does He promise in 12:2 to 3?
 - b. Sarah's name is not in the call, but her life is utterly bound up in the obedience to it. What does this tell you about how God's call on one spouse becomes a call on the other?
3. Genesis 12:10 to 20 records the first time Abram, in fear, asks Sarai to lie about being his wife. Put yourself in her sandals. What would that have felt like? What does the episode reveal about Abram at this stage of his faith?

For Thought and Discussion: Even faithful men can fail their wives in the very moments their wives most need them to be brave. How do we live with imperfect spouses without becoming bitter, and how does God protect His promises in spite of human failure (Romans 8:28)?

Study Skill, Comparing Translations: Different English translations make different choices about how to render Hebrew words and idioms. Comparing two or three sound translations of the same passage often surfaces shades of meaning you would miss in a single version. For Sarah's story, try reading Genesis 18:11 to 15 in two translations side by side and note where they differ. A few useful options for English readers include the ASV, ESV, NKJV, NASB, and CSB. The point is not to crown one translation but to let several careful renderings teach you what the inspired text actually says.

Sarah's solution (16:1–16)

What Sarai proposes in 16:1 to 3 was not, by ancient standards, scandalous. A barren wife could give her female servant to her husband as a surrogate, and any child born of that union would legally belong to the wife. The custom is documented in surviving marriage contracts from the same era. What is striking is not that Sarai thought of this, but that she thought of it instead of waiting on the God who had personally promised her a child.

4.
 - a. In 16:1 to 2, Sarai proposes a plan. What pressures, cultural, emotional, and theological, converge to make this seem reasonable to her?

- b. What is missing from her plan?
- 5.
 - a. Read 16:4 to 6 carefully. Once the plan succeeds, what unravels? Who blames whom?
 - b. What does this story teach us about what happens when we try to help God keep His promises?

Optional Application: Identify one area of your life where you are tempted to construct a "Hagar plan," a workaround because God's timing feels too slow. Write it down. Then ask yourself, honestly, what it would look like to wait on God in that area for one more month before doing anything.

The promise renewed (17:1–21; 18:1–15)

In Genesis 17, God changes their names. Abram ("exalted father") becomes Abraham ("father of many"), and Sarai becomes Sarah (both forms essentially mean "princess"). In Hebrew thought a name often expressed identity and destiny. When God changed a name, He was rewriting the future. Notice that He changes their names before He changes their circumstances. He calls her "princess" while her cradle is still empty, and waits for Isaac to catch up.

- 6. Why would God change their names before changing their circumstances? What does this say about how God sees us?

For Further Study: Names matter in Scripture. Compare these name changes with Jacob to Israel (Genesis 32:28), Simon to Peter (Matthew 16:18), and Saul to Paul (Acts 13:9). What pattern emerges?

- 7. In 18:1 to 8, three visitors arrive at Abraham's tent. How does Sarah participate in the hospitality? Where is she when the announcement is made (18:10)?

Sarah's laugh in 18:12 is a quiet one, hidden behind the tent flap. The Hebrew word is the same root from which Isaac ("he laughs") will take his name. There will be three laughs in this section of Genesis. Abraham laughs in 17:17. Sarah laughs in 18:12. Isaac himself becomes the laugh of God's people in 21:6. The same Hebrew word carries skepticism the first time and joy the last. God is not offended by either; He is patient enough to carry her from one to the other.

8.
 - a. Sarah laughs in 18:12. What kind of laugh is it?
 - b. How does the visitor respond in 18:13 to 14? What is the question He asks, and how would you answer it about the situation you are in today?

For Thought and Discussion: "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (Genesis 18:14). The same question comes back in Jeremiah 32:17, 27 and in Luke 1:37 when the angel speaks to Mary. Why do you think God keeps asking it of His people, generation after generation?

The promise kept (21:1-7)

9. Read 21:1 to 2. Count how many ways the text emphasizes that what happened is exactly what God said would happen. What is the author underlining?
10.
 - a. Isaac's name means "he laughs." In 18:12, Sarah laughed in disbelief. In 21:6, she laughs again, but it is a different kind of laughter. What changed?
 - b. When was the last time God turned your skeptical laugh into a joyful one? What did it cost you to wait for that?

Optional Application: Write down the longest you have ever had to wait for an answer to a specific prayer. What did you learn about God in the waiting that you would not have learned any other way?

Sarah in the New Testament

The New Testament looks back at Sarah more often than at almost any other Old Testament woman. The writer of Hebrews places her in the great list of the faithful (Hebrews 11:11). Paul builds an entire allegory on her in Galatians 4:21 to 31. Peter holds her up as a model for Christian wives (1 Peter 3:1 to 6). And in Romans 4, Paul uses Abraham's faith (which Sarah shared, even imperfectly) to teach the church what saving faith looks like.

Study Skill, How the New Testament Uses the Old: When the New Testament writers reach back into the Old Testament, they are not just borrowing illustrations. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they are showing how the Old Testament was preparing the way for Christ and His church from the beginning. When you find a New Testament passage

quoting or alluding to the Old, follow the cross-reference back to the source and read it in context. You will often discover that the New Testament writer is drawing out a meaning that was always there, but not yet fully visible until Christ came.

11.
 - a. Hebrews 11:11 places Sarah in the great roll call of faith. Given everything we have just read about her, the doubts, the laughter, the Hagar episode, how can that be?
 - b. What does Hebrews 11:11 say her faith actually rested on?

For Further Study: Romans 4 makes Abraham the father of all who believe. Galatians 4:21 to 31 turns Sarah and Hagar into a picture of two covenants: promise versus law, freedom versus slavery. Read both passages. Notice in Romans 4:11 to 12 that Abraham's faith is shown by his obedience, and in Galatians 5:6 that "faith working through love" is what counts. What does this tell us about the kind of faith that saves?

12.
 - a. Read 1 Peter 3:1 to 6. What specifically does Peter commend in Sarah?
 - b. How is Peter's vision of "quiet" and "gentle" different from the weakness our culture might assume those words mean? Where do you see strength in Sarah?
 - c. Peter calls Sarah's daughters those who "do good" and do not fear. What is the relationship in this passage between faith and obedient action?

Your response

13.
 - a. Sarah was kept waiting longer than she ever imagined, and God still kept His promise. What promise of God are you currently waiting on?
 - b. What does this lesson invite you to believe about that wait?
14. Write one specific way you sense God inviting you to trust Him more deeply this week, and one concrete step you will take in light of it.

For the group

Warm-up. Begin by asking each woman to share the longest she has ever had to wait for something important. How did that wait change her?

Discussion. Sarah's story has unusual emotional range, fear, jealousy, laughter, joy, so the discussion will be richer if you let women share honestly. Pay particular attention to questions 4 and 5 (the Hagar plan), 8 (Sarah's laugh and God's question), and 13 (what each woman is waiting on).

Wrap-up. Close by praying through the question "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" for each woman by name. Give thanks that God's promises do not depend on our perfect faith, but on His perfect faithfulness, and on the obedience of the One who fulfilled every promise in His cross and resurrection (2 Corinthians 1:20).